

## ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL FACTORS IN DELIGHTING CUSTOMERS

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*Firms are interested in increasing customer retention rates and prior research has suggested that providing customers with complete satisfaction (also termed "delight") is the best way to ensure high retention rates. Managers are faced with the problem of deciding how to allocate limited resources in a few critical areas so that they can delight their customers. This study argues on the basis of theory that compared to attributes related to service characteristics (e.g., cleanliness or service hours) attributes related to interpersonal behavior (e.g., overall attitude of a dealer's staff) are the factors that best discriminate between satisfaction and delight. This notion was empirically tested and supported by field data gathered from dealerships of a major U.S. automobile manufacturer.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Since 1990 the concept of customer delight has grown in importance with different firms using different terms to refer to the same idea. Firms like General Motors and Xerox were known to use the term "customer obsession" while AT&T launched the Universal Card with the explicit goal of "delighting" its customers (AT&T 1994). The concept soon became more than a "buzzword". Reichheld (1994) found that customers in the service sector who were extremely satisfied were much more likely to be loyal customers than those who were simply satisfied, i.e., that there was a big difference between customers who marked a 5, and those who marked a 4, on a 1 to 5 satisfaction scale, where 5 was extremely satisfied and 1 was extremely dissatisfied. Similarly, Oliver et al. (1997) and Rust et al. (1995) view extreme satisfaction to be the same as delight and hence believe that delighting customers leads to favorable consequences for firms.

The favorable consequences that managers associated with customer delight made intuitive sense and an increasing number of firms began looking for ways to

delight their customers. As firms tried to move from the strategic objective of delighting customers to the operational and executional level, they found themselves facing unanswered questions. Is customer delight the same as extreme levels of customer satisfaction? Are there specific factors that discriminate between customer satisfaction and customer delight? Managers seek answers to these questions to guide their actions as they try to delight customers. Should they strive to delight customers by improving performance on all attributes known to be important predictors of satisfaction, or, are there a few critical attributes on which they should concentrate and improve their performance to delight their customers?

In this paper, we theoretically identify and empirically verify the antecedent factors that best discriminate between customer satisfaction and customer delight. Our study does not address the issue of whether and how delight is different from very high levels of satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> However, our study does provide some answers to the managerial question: are there some specific factors that discriminate between customer satisfaction and

<sup>1</sup> Hence, one could describe our results in terms of identifying "discriminators between delight and satisfaction" or "discriminators between extreme satisfaction and satisfaction". The latter assumption leads one to believe that there may be a non-linear relationship between satisfaction and its predictors and this has also been suggested in the literature (Ngobo 1999).

customer delight. In this study we assume, as did Oliver et al. (1997) and Rust et al. (1995), that delight is the same as extreme levels of satisfaction.

### **Choice of Field Setting**

Prior research (Kumar and Olshavsky 1997) exploring the differences in antecedents between delight and satisfaction had been conducted in an experimental setting. The emotion of delight was evoked by having subjects read scenarios in which the researchers manipulated specific aspects of the scenario. In this paper we describe the results of a study based on the real service experiences of customers of automobile dealerships.

The decision to use a field setting involves certain trade-offs. On the positive side, we come a step closer to tapping the consumer's actual emotions after a service experience than with scenarios where the reported emotion is what the consumers feel when they imagine themselves in that situation. From a practitioner's point of view, this is a tremendous leap forward. On the negative side, a field study imposed restrictions on the researchers, such as limits on the length of the survey. These will be discussed in greater detail in the limitations section of the paper.

### **Theoretical Background**

We examined the various antecedents of satisfaction identified in the marketing literature and tried to identify those factors that could best discriminate between satisfaction and delight. Prior research in customer satisfaction has identified various factors that influence consumers' evaluations of satisfaction with a product or service. The dominant paradigm in the satisfaction literature is the disconfirmation of expectations theory which suggests that the extent to which a product or service deviates from a consumer's expectations has a strong influence on satisfaction with the product or service (Oliver 1980; Churchill and Surprenant 1982). Other factors that are known to influence consumers' satisfaction with a product or service include consumers' perceptions of equity or fairness of a transaction (Oliver and DeSarbo 1988), their perceptions of the (quality of) performance of the product or service (Churchill and

Surprenant 1982), and the extent to which the product or service is personalized for the consumer (Surprenant and Solomon 1987).

The literature on delight has been very sparse in the fields of both marketing and psychology. Published research on delight does not go beyond pointing out that delight is characterized by high levels of joy and surprise (Plutchik 1980). In the marketing literature, Oliver et al. (1997) characterize delight as being a function of surprise, arousal and positive affect and then posit that arousal itself is a function of surprise. This characterization is very similar to Plutchik's definition of delight if one sees joy as being a positive affect. These definitions suggest that marketers can delight customers if they exceed consumers' expectations by a large amount because that would lead to surprise and, if the expectations are exceeded in a positive direction, then consumers will also experience joy. Hence, this line of thinking suggests that the way to delight customers' is to provide extremely high levels of satisfaction. The practical problem is that it is not always possible for firms to exceed customers' expectations by a large amount. Even if they are able to do it, they have to incur costs in achieving this goal. Thus, managers often want to know what are the areas under their control where they should allocate more resources so that they can try to delight their customers. For example, if managers wanted to increase perceptions of fairness, they could offer price breaks to customers. Or, if they wanted to increase levels of personalization, they could allocate more resources to hire personnel to offer more personalized service or, alternatively, retrain existing personnel to offer these services.

### **Different Standards for Satisfaction and Delight**

The dominant paradigm in the customer satisfaction literature suggests that disconfirmation of (prior) expectations plays a critical role in influencing customers' satisfaction judgments. We also believe that satisfaction judgments are influenced by the standards formed by consumers before an event. On the other hand, surprise or unexpectedly high levels of service has been proposed as an influencer of delight (Plutchik 1980). Mazursky and Ofir (1990) found that in cases where the event is very

discrepant from prior expectations, a person may construct comparison standards after the event. This gives rise to the possibility that customer delight is influenced by standards constructed after an event and these standards may be very different from the standards (held by a person prior to an event) which influence judgments of customer satisfaction. The shift in standards may be reflected as *a shift in the expected level of performance or it may be a shift in the attributes which are considered critical* to determine customer satisfaction or customer delight. It has been proposed that a reason for this shift in standards before and after an event is that standards constructed after the event may be influenced by the event itself (Halstead 1993). Hence, in a service setting, it is possible that the service attributes that are critical to evoke delight with the overall service will be very different from the service attributes that influence the same consumer's judgments of satisfaction with the overall service. Further, it will be helpful to identify the nature or characteristics of these attributes that can best discriminate between satisfaction and delight.

#### **Satisfaction and Delight Standards in a Service Context**

McGill and Iacobucci (1991) found that consumers' post-experience comparison standards after receiving a service were characterized by descriptions of a larger number of specific features than their pre-experience standards which had more descriptions of abstract process features. For example, in the context of evaluating a training workshop on a spreadsheet package, it was found that post-experience standards included specific features such as time available to ask questions while pre-experience standards included abstract features like professional manner of the instructor. McGill and Iacobucci (1991) suggest that post-experience comparison standards in a service context are more likely to involve *interpersonal behavior* of the service provider whereas traits of the service provider or *characteristics of the service* are more likely to be a part of pre-experience standards. The above finding is in line with our suggestion that there are differences between standards formed by consumers before an event (i.e., before a service is received) and the standards formed after the event (i.e., after the

service is received), and leads to the proposition that comparison standards may be different for customer satisfaction and customer delight.

#### **Hypothesis**

We believe that the above proposition enables us to predict which aspects of a service might enhance customer satisfaction and which aspects might, in addition to satisfying customers, also delight customers. In other words, we use our theoretical discussion to identify antecedent attributes that will best discriminate between customer satisfaction and customer delight.

Aspects that are characteristics of the service itself are likely to be important determinants of customer satisfaction. However, these attributes will not be as good as interpersonal behavior in discriminating between satisfaction and delight. This is because the performance along these attributes influences satisfaction and, to the extent that satisfaction levels rise when people are delighted, we can expect perceptions of performance along service characteristics (or traits) to also rise when customers are delighted. Hence, delighted and satisfied customers may both rate a firm's performance along service characteristics as being high and those who rate this performance as being low will be neither satisfied nor delighted. On the other hand, our earlier discussion suggests that high levels of performance on interpersonal behavior attributes are likely to evoke delight. Low or medium levels of performance on interpersonal behavior attributes is not likely to evoke delight, though it need not affect satisfaction levels. For example, in a service context, we would argue that the time spent by a mechanic in a car dealership to explain a car's problems and possible repair solutions to the customer is likely to be an important determinant of customer delight. Our theory suggests that if the mechanic does not spend much time explaining the car's problems, customers may not be delighted yet their satisfaction levels need not be affected as long as the problem was fixed accurately. Hence, these interpersonal behavior attributes will be better at discriminating between customer satisfaction and customer delight.

*Specifically, we hypothesize that a firm's performance on aspects of a service that are related to a service provider's interpersonal behavior will be a better discriminator between customer satisfaction and customer delight than aspects related to the firm's service characteristics.*

### **Operationalization**

We tested our hypothesis by carrying out a field study in the context of service provided by the dealerships of a major automobile manufacturer in the United States.

### **Methodology**

The data for our study was gathered from the customers of one of the major U.S. automobile manufacturers. The sample consisted of customers who had recently visited any one of the manufacturer's dealerships in a large Midwestern city for the purposes of servicing their automobile. The data was obtained through telephone interviews carried out by trained professional interviewers. The customers were contacted by telephone during evening hours on weekdays to maximize the probability of contact. The potential respondent was told about the purpose of the call (i.e., a survey about their experience at a specific dealership) and asked one screening question to determine their eligibility for participation in the survey. Specifically, only those customers who had personally taken the automobile to the dealership were included as respondents. Members who could not be reached at the first attempt were contacted at a later time. A total of 191 respondents provided usable responses for the study.

### **Survey**

The survey instrument was designed to get maximum information from the respondent in a very short time. It was felt that the instrument should be one that could be administered over the telephone within five to seven minutes as it is believed that longer interviews could irritate or bore customers who then hang up the phone (Aaker and Day 1990). The survey asked fifteen questions about the respondent's

most recent experience with the specific automobile dealership.

At the outset, the respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the service experience during their most recent visit to the automobile manufacturer's dealership (the name of the dealership patronized by the customer was mentioned). The respondents were asked to provide ratings on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being completely satisfied and 1 being completely dissatisfied. The respondents were asked three questions that captured customers' ratings of various interpersonal aspects of the service provider and four questions that captured customers' ratings of various characteristics of the service itself. These ratings were also obtained on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being completely satisfied and 1 being completely dissatisfied. The interpersonal aspects of the service provider on which customers rated the dealership included: overall attitude of the dealership's staff, overall helpfulness shown by the dealership's staff, and explanation provided to the customer of the service work that was needed on their vehicle. The characteristics of the service on which customers rated the dealership included: the cleanliness of the dealership, the service hours of the dealership, scheduling of work, and the length of time needed to complete the work on customer's vehicle. The survey concluded with an open-ended question which was aimed at getting any other comments about the service experience which the customer may have had. Finally, the interviewer thanked the respondent for their time and their opinions.

### **Analysis**

*Measures.* A Principal Axis factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed. The items measuring *interpersonal behavior* and *service characteristics* loaded as expected. The three items measuring interpersonal behavior loaded much more heavily on that construct ( $\lambda > 0.6$ ) than on the service characteristics construct ( $\lambda < 0.3$ ). Similarly, two of the three items ("service hours" and "scheduling of work") measuring service characteristics loaded much more heavily on that construct ( $\lambda > 0.7$ ) than on the other construct ( $\lambda < 0.3$ ). The third item



("cleanliness of dealership") had a relatively low loading of 0.34 on service characteristic but had an insignificant loading on interpersonal behavior. The fourth item ("length of time needed to complete work on your vehicle") measuring service characteristic loaded more heavily on this construct ( $\lambda=0.41$ ) but also had a significant cross loading on interpersonal behavior ( $\lambda=0.32$ ). Hence, the loadings of this item suggested that the item may be capturing a little bit of both constructs (our findings related to this item will be discussed in detail below). Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine the reliability of the two constructs. Cronbach's alpha for the interpersonal behavior construct was 0.77 and for the service characteristics construct was 0.66. Both reliabilities were around the acceptable norm of 0.70 (Nunnally 1970), with one being slightly above and the other slightly below the norm.

*Estimation method.* Respondents who gave a 9 or a 10 rating on the question pertaining to "overall satisfaction with the service" were considered as "delighted" customers while the rest were considered as "satisfied" customers (only three respondents from our sample of 190 customers indicated they were dissatisfied; the rest were either satisfied or delighted with the service they received). To test our hypothesis that a service provider's performance on the interpersonal behavior items will be the best discriminators of customer delight from customer satisfaction, we conducted a discriminant analysis using the simultaneous estimation method (later, we discuss how the results were verified by logistic regression which is more robust to violations of certain assumptions). We chose the simultaneous estimation method over the stepwise estimation method. Stepwise discriminant analysis would be inappropriate for testing our hypothesis because it will not show the discriminating power of the items when the seven items were considered together. This goal could be achieved using the simultaneous estimation method.

Our hypothesis predicted that the three items measuring interpersonal behaviors would be the best discriminators of customer delight from customer satisfaction in a service context. For this, we conducted a simultaneous estimation discriminant analysis using the seven items measuring

interpersonal behaviors and service characteristics as the independent variables. The sample of 190 respondents was split into two groups - an analysis sample (60%) and a hold out sample (40%).

*Test of Assumptions.* There are two key assumptions that are considered desirable for conducting a discriminant analysis. The first is equal dispersion and covariance structures across the groups (i.e., across "delighted" and "satisfied"). We tested this assumption with the Box's M test and found that there were significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) in the covariance matrices across the two groups. The violation of this assumption was likely to lead to "overclassifying" observations into the group with the larger covariance matrices (Hair et al. 1995). This problem was minimized in our case by the large sample size and also by using group-specific covariance matrices for classification purposes. The second assumption pertains to the multivariate normality of the independent variables. This assumption was first tested by checking for the univariate normality of the variables. The univariate normality of the independent variables was assessed by carrying out a non-parametric test, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. This test revealed that many of the independent variables were drawn from a distribution that was significantly different from a normal distribution ( $p<0.05$ ). Though the evidence regarding the sensitivity of discriminant analysis to these violations is mixed (Hair et al. 1995, 1996), it was decided to take a conservative approach and verify our results using logistic regression, if our hypothesis was indeed supported.

## Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the independent variables in the study. It may be noted that the means of all but one of the independent variables was higher for the delighted group than the satisfied group. The lone exception was cleanliness of the dealership where there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. It is very interesting to note that cleanliness was the attribute that got the highest rating from the satisfied customers while cleanliness was the attribute that got the lowest rating from the delighted customers.

The discriminant function estimated from the data was highly significant (Wilks' Lambda= 0.563,  $p < 0.001$ ). The size of the loadings of the different attributes on the discriminant function reveals the importance of the attributes in discriminating between satisfied and delighted customers, when the set of seven attributes are considered together. The results show that the three most discriminating attributes were the "length of time needed to complete work on your vehicle" ( $\lambda = .708$ ), "overall attitude of dealership's staff" ( $\lambda = .661$ ), and the "explanation given of the service work that was needed on your vehicle" ( $\lambda = .621$ ). Two of the three interpersonal behavior attributes, overall attitude of dealer's staff and explanation given of service work done, show up as two of the three attributes that best distinguish between customer satisfaction and customer delight. The only attribute that was not an interpersonal behavior attribute among the three best discriminators of satisfaction and delight was the "length of time needed to complete work on your vehicle." Interestingly, this attribute had loaded considerably on the interpersonal behavior construct, though it loaded slightly more on the services characteristics construct (see Measures section above). The remaining attributes in decreasing order of importance in their ability to discriminate between satisfaction and delight were as follows: "scheduling of work on your vehicle" ( $\lambda = 0.53$ ), "overall helpfulness of dealer's staff" ( $\lambda = 0.41$ ), "service hours at dealer" ( $\lambda = 0.26$ ), and "cleanliness at dealership" ( $\lambda = 0.10$ ). Thus, we find that two of the three best discriminators between satisfaction and delight were interpersonal behavior attributes and three of the four least discriminating attributes were service characteristics. This leads us to conclude that we have moderate to good support for our hypothesis that aspects related to a service provider's interpersonal behavior are better discriminators between customer satisfaction and customer delight than aspects related to the firm's service characteristics.

The predictive accuracy and the validity of the discriminant function was assessed by examining the classification matrices for both the analysis and the holdout samples. Table 2 shows that 87.6% of subjects in the analysis sample were correctly classified as being satisfied or delighted while 85.7%

of the holdout sample were classified accurately. Though we obtained high levels of classification accuracy, it was necessary to compare these levels with the a priori chance of classifying subjects accurately without the discriminant function. This was particularly important as we had unequal group sizes. The proportional chance criterion,  $C_{PRO}$ , which gives the a priori chance of classifying subjects accurately without the discriminant function was calculated as follows (Hair et. al. 1995):

$C_{PRO} = p^2 + (1-p)^2$ , where  $p$  is proportion of subjects in the satisfied group.

TABLE 1

	Satisfied Group	Delighted Group
Items	Mean (Std. Dev.)	Mean (Std. Dev.)
Schedule Work	8.25 (1.54)	9.63 (1.10)
Service Hours	8.67 (1.50)	9.46 (1.42)
Overall Attitude	8.79 (1.53)	9.88 (0.36)
Overall Helpfulness	8.75 (1.54)	9.76 (1.03)
Cleanliness	9.04 (1.30)	9.33 (1.35)
Timeliness	7.33 (2.71)	9.60 (0.95)
Service Explanation	7.67 (2.32)	9.54 (1.06)

The proportional chance criterion for the analysis and the holdout samples were 66.5% and 59.2%. The classification accuracies obtained by the discriminant function were well above the levels that could have been obtained by chance. The discriminatory power of the classification matrix was also assessed by a statistical test, the Press's Q statistic. This statistic takes into account the number of correct classifications, total sample size, and the number of groups. The Press's Q statistic for the analysis sample and the holdout sample was 63.9 and 35.6 respectively. In both cases, the calculated statistic was well above the critical value of 6.63 at a significance level of 0.01.

The support for our hypothesis obtained from the results of the discriminant analysis was further verified by performing a logistic regression analysis as this technique is more robust than discriminant analysis with respect to violations of multivariate normality and equal variance-covariance matrices

TABLE 2

Analysis Sample	Predicted	Predicted
	Satisfied	Delighted
Satisfied (Actual)	13	11
Delighted (Actual)	3	86

87.6 % of selected original grouped cases correctly classified.

Holdout Sample	Predicted	Predicted
	Satisfied	Delighted
Satisfied (Actual)	15	7
Delighted (Actual)	4	51

85.7 % of unselected original grouped cases correctly classified.

across groups. The overall fit of the Logit model was good as indicated by the Chi-square goodness of fit test ( $p < 0.05$ ). The Logit model was able to accurately classify 81% of the respondents as satisfied or delighted customers. The Logit analysis also revealed that two of the three most important attributes that predicted whether a customer would be satisfied or delighted were interpersonal behavior attributes. Further, these were the same attributes identified in the discriminant analysis - overall attitude of dealer's staff ( $e^B = 2.23$ , Wald=4.23,  $p < 0.05$ ) and the explanation given of the service work needed on the vehicle ( $e^B = 1.65$ , Wald=9.96,  $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that a one unit increase in performance in customer perceptions of overall attitude of the dealer's staff would increase by 2.23 times the probability of a customer being delighted as compared to being satisfied. Similarly, a one unit increase in customer perceptions of the explanation given about the work needed on the vehicle increases by 1.65 times the probability of a customer being delighted as compared to being satisfied. As in the discriminant analysis, the only attribute that was not an interpersonal behavior attribute among the top three predictors of delight vs. satisfaction was the length of time needed to complete work on customer's vehicle. Thus, we find support for our hypothesis is verified by both analytical methods.

## Discussion

The results of this study have for the first time, to the best of our knowledge, identified factors that might help managers discriminate between aspects that can delight customers and aspects that satisfy customers.

This study found that aspects of a service provider's interpersonal behavior are much better at discriminating between customer satisfaction and customer delight than aspects of a firm's service characteristics. For example, in the context of our study we found that factors such as the overall attitude of the dealer's staff or the explanation provided to the customer of the work needed on the vehicle were better discriminators between delighted and satisfied customers than factors like service hours at the dealership or the cleanliness at the dealership.

This means that a manager interested in delighting his/her customers with limited resources under his/her control should allocate those resources to aspects of the business which enhance the customer's perceptions of the service provider's interpersonal behavior. For example, it might mean increasing the resources allocated to training employees, or having new employees spend more time working with experienced employees who get high ratings from customers on interpersonal behavior attributes before they interact with customers themselves.

While our study does not address the issue of whether delight is indeed different from extreme satisfaction, it offers insight that is of great practical value to managers. Prior research (Reichheld 1994) has found that there is a clear difference between repurchase behaviors of customers who are satisfied and those who are extremely satisfied (or delighted). The implication of this finding was that managers must constantly strive to delight their customers or provide extreme satisfaction. However, there was no specific guideline to managers on how they could allocate their resources to delight customers other than the standard prescription that they must provide higher levels of performance on attributes that influence satisfaction.

Most managers we have interacted with have pointed out the following problems in trying to increase performance on all attributes that are important influencers of satisfaction: (a) there are resource limitations which force managers to make a choice and select a few critical areas on which they can focus and try to improve performance in

those areas; and, (b) in many of the areas that are identified as being important determinants of satisfaction, there are certain upper limits beyond which it is difficult to improve performance without a substantial amount of additional investment. The results of our study can help managers address the first of the above two problems as it clearly tells them that if they are interested in delighting customers, interpersonal behavior attributes is the area they should focus on compared to service characteristics like cleanliness, etc. However, we admit that our results may not help managers with the second problem because it is very possible that even improving performance on interpersonal behavior attributes beyond a certain level may require significant additional investment. For example, if employees have to spend more time explaining things to customers, it is possible that a firm will have to hire more people to maintain the same level of productivity as before.

The contribution of this study is that it clearly identifies a direction for managers to allocate their attention and resources as they try to delight customers. From a set of factors that are known to influence satisfaction, we argue that there is a subset of attributes that can discriminate better than other attributes between customer satisfaction and customer delight. We identified this subset of factors on the basis of theory developed in the marketing literature and then empirically validated our hypothesis. An important aspect of our research which makes it appealing for practitioners and academics is that our data was gathered in the field from real customers whose responses were reactions to an actual service encounter that they recently experienced.

### **Limitations**

As indicated earlier, this study has some limitations that arise out of the fact that this data was from a field study conducted for a leading automobile manufacturer. As such, we were constrained in the extent to which we could broaden our scope of enquiry and also the depth of our enquiries. Hence, we were limited to asking questions on only a few attributes though we would have liked to include many more. On the other hand, we were told that the

attributes chosen were attributes known from prior experience of managers and researchers in the industry to be important determinants of customer satisfaction in the context of our study. We were limited in the number of questions we could ask because a telephone survey being conducted by professional interviewers meant that the client would have to pay more for every additional question included in the survey. In spite of these constraints, we feel that the results of this study could be enlightening and may set the stage for further detailed and rigorous research (both experimental research in the laboratory and field studies) into customer delight.

### **Future Research**

We feel that our results suggest certain obvious areas for further research. First, the question of the differences between satisfaction and delight remains to be addressed. Our study did not address the issue and hence our results may be interpreted in terms of discriminators of "delight" and satisfaction or discriminators of "extreme satisfaction" and satisfaction. Future research can be designed to specifically address this issue. Second, findings from discriminant or regression analysis are subject to the set of predictors included in the analysis. Hence, if a different or larger set of independent variables were included in the study, the importance of individual variables in discriminating between delight and satisfaction may change. It would be worthwhile to enlarge the scope of the research by including other variables known to affect satisfaction and see whether the results from the present study would still be valid. Further, if such studies are carried out in contexts other than the automobile industry, then it can increase the generalizability of the present findings.

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